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# An Exploration of the Spiritual Heart of Human Science Inquiry: A Methodological Call of Our Time

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# **An Exploration of the Spiritual Heart of Human Science Inquiry:**

## **A Methodological Call of Our Time**

**David Cooperrider and Frank Barrett**

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion, which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.

--Albert Einstein

What is the role of spiritual experience in human science research? What is the relationship between experiencing a sense of the sacred, and our capacity to inquire, to ask questions, to wonder, to be surprised, to be open and to learn? What do we mean by “spirit of inquiry”; and, in these words, do we really mean to take the word *spirit* seriously? If so, in what ways? What happens, for example in an interview, when the interviewer approaches his or her work with a sense of sacred vocation, or better yet a genuine feeling of gratitude to be meeting with another human being as precious soul, not just some faceless or bureaucratic role? Will the relationship and dialogue be affected? How about the data? And later, what about the writing itself? *Why is the language of spiritual experience something we generally restrict to religious people or mystics—but then again in so many autobiographical footnotes of scientists, like Einstein, we find quotes that rival the articulations of the Sufi poet Rumi and words that resonate, in concert, with the compassionate heart of His Holiness the Dalai Lama?*

Our concern in this essay is supremely practical and is embedded in a commitment to the Lewinian call that “there is nothing so practical as good theory”. Indeed, as we were preparing this paper we were involved with a doctoral research methods course, on the nitty-gritty practice of theory-building. The opening paragraph of course description usefully helps set a stage:

*“... theory-building in the social sciences is one of the greatest adventures and significant vocations life can present.* The impact of good theory, no matter how tiny or vast, can today instantly connect across our inter-networked planet and affect every human being in a relationally alive, reverberating universe. Through inquiry we are lured into life’s compelling mysteries and are gifted, often when least expected, with fresh questions that startle, interrupt, evoke. And for those that allow themselves to “dare in scholarship” there seems always to be changes—transformed conceptions of self and career, surprising turns in relationships, decisive shifts in perspective, and articulations of knowledge that

can serve the larger good, of building a better world. But the greatest contribution of theory—indeed any good methodology of inquiry—is that it helps open us up to the inexhaustible energies of new knowledge. This session is a reflection on the craft of grounded theory construction, of a way of doing research in the human sciences that exists, in William James’ contrast, not as a dull habit but as an acute fever. It is about research-method *alive*”.

It seems hard to imagine a methods course that tries to talk about things like mystical experience as a methodological imperative. Nevertheless we have come to the realization that not to talk about it is to stifle the excitement, the joy, and the real thrill of creating new concepts and theoretical ideas. Consider the curious wonderment that Aristophanes experienced when he gazed at the Greek sky, or Shakespeare when he perused Victorian life. Their poetic words have helped shape the way we experience our lives – from the way we talk about romantic love to the how we think about pride and heroism. No doubt these poets experienced the exhilaration and delirium of contemplating that which seemed just beyond their cognitive grasp. This was no doubt the same fascination that Kurt Lewin experienced when he contemplated the dynamics of group life, or Abe Maslow when he considered the human as a “fully evolved, authentic self” (Maslow, 1962, p 15). The curiosity and fascination that led these poets and researchers to articulate what heretofore had not been spoken would not have been possible had they simply been trying to solve previous problems, a point we will explore below. Nothing, as we shall explore, is more practical for realizing our desire better theory than something that might be called spiritual openness. To make this idea accessible is not as difficult or esoteric as it might seem.

Our assumption is this: that the most defining and important feature of our field, the heart of our field, is what Schein and Bennis (1963) many years ago first talked about as the “spirit of inquiry”. What this means to us today, and ways we can cultivate it is what this reflection is about. Some of the ways are epistemological; others are metaphorical; others more methodological, like the artistry of the questions we ask, and still others have to do with our way of *being-in-relationship* with the world—including the language of elevated emotion, for example, of inspiration, hope and joy. In all of this we draw upon stories from our own and others work with a special action-research approach we have called *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, Barrett and Srivastva, 1994).

To be sure many of the comments deserve to be taken to a much more complex and academic level. But much of what we have to say is personal and tentative and is offered, therefore, hopefully in a more straightforward manner. It involves lessons from our experience and grows from the simple question: When have we felt truly alive in inquiry, and are there ways to actively cultivate more of “it” in our work and lives with what benefits? “ Here—from the epistemological to the practical—are a few of the learnings.

## We Live in Worlds Our Theories Create

It is not by accident that the inaugural issue of *Reflections* featured the ideas of Kurt Lewin. “Lewin probably contributed more to the practice of management and to the field of organizational consulting” said Ed Schein (2001, p.7), “than anyone in history”. And one of the most enduring legacies of his work, as most would attest, was his commitment to bridge the gap between science and the realm of practical affairs. Science, he said, should be used to inform and educate social practice, and subsequent action would then inform science: “ We should consider action, research, and training as a triangle that should be kept together” (Lewin, 1948, p. 211).

The immense influence of this thinker around this seed of an idea is a complete puzzle if we look simply to his writings. Lewin published only 2 papers—a mere 22 pages—concerned directly with the idea of action-research (Peters and Robinson, 1984). Perhaps it was not just the ideas?

Biographer Alfred Marrow (1968) in his brilliant account of Lewin’s life in *The Practical Theorist* sheds light. The uniqueness of Lewin, said Marrow, is that he was a man on fire, a passionate and creative thinker, continuously “knocking at the door of the unknown” and studying “topics that had been believed to be psychologically unapproachable”. Lewin’s presence was marked by a spirit of inquiry “that burned incessantly and affected all who came in contact with him”, especially his students. The spirit of discovery and creative thought was fueled further, said Marrow, because of his belief that inquiry itself could be used to construct a more democratic and dignified future. At least that was his hope and dream, for Lewin had *not* forgotten his experience as a refugee from fascism in the late 1930s. Perhaps this is why he revolted so strongly against a detached ivory-tower view of science, a science too often immersed in trivial matters, tranquilized by its disengaged and standardized methods, and limited in its scope of inquiry. Lewin was different. It was this spirit—an overflowing, infectious curiosity coupled with a sense of purpose concerning the need for a knowledge-inspired societal development—that marked Lewin’s creative impact on both his students and the field.

His statement “there is nothing so practical as good theory” stands as a clarion call, and yet it here it seems something has been lost since Lewin. Indeed we find a growing irony: at precisely a time when this statement is more true than ever before—that we create our world’s through our ideas-- the voices of doubt are growing. Action research, even its advocates are saying, is not living up to its potential on the theory side of the theory-practice combination (Gustavsen, 2001; Bradbury and Reason, 2001). Indeed many, over the years, have addressed this issue and in almost the same words: Bartunek (1983), for example, talked about the primary barrier limiting the potential of action research has been the

discipline's romance with "action" and the expense of "theory"; and Beer (in *Reflections*, 2001) argues it's a matter not of creating just any theory, but more "useful theory" (p. 59).

We are persuaded that this debate is outworn. The separation of "theory" from "practice" is an unfortunate historical way of talking that constrains the spirit of inquiry vivified in Lewin's life because for Lewin, *theory was praxis*—it was a form of practice of the most powerful sort. Unfortunately, as we have said, Lewin wrote only sparsely on the deeper epistemological issues at stake here and he died at an early age of 57, at the height of his work. So when judged in relation to the sophistication of today's epistemological ferment across all the sciences, we can understand Peters and Robinson's (1984) comments when they argue that Lewin's progressive vision of an action science fell short. In particular it did not offer a clear metatheoretical alternative to objectivist-reductionist philosophies of science of the day and in fact he seemed to oscillate, like so much of the history of science itself, back and forth between subjectivist/perceptualist accounts of knowledge and realist/objectivist accounts. Was it the person's *perception* of the world that matters, or was there some kind of objective environment in Lewin's famous formula,  $B=f(p,e)$ ?

Much needed, we believe, for realization of action research's promise as a truly significant science is an understanding of knowledge that dynamically re-unites theory and practice, the idea and the act, the symbolic and the sociobehavioral, into one powerful and integral unity. And this is precisely where things get more interesting *because throughout the academy a revolution is afoot, alive with tremendous ferment and implication, in regards to modernist views of knowledge*. In particular, what is confronted is the Western conception of objective, individualistic, historic knowledge—"a conception that has insinuated itself into virtually all aspects of modern institutional life" (Gergen, 1985, P. 272). At stake are questions that pertain to the deepest dimensions of our being and humanity: how we know what we know, whose voices and interpretations matter, whether the world is governed by external laws independent of human choices and consciousness, and where is knowledge to be located (in the individual "mind", or out there "externally" in nature or impersonal structures)? At stake are issues that are profoundly fundamental, not just for the future of social science but for the trajectory of all our lives

In our view the finest work in this area, one that in our view brings to fruition the most radical ideas in Lewinian thought, can be found in Ken Gergen's *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (1982) and *Realities and Relationships: Soundings In Social Construction* (1994). What Gergen does, in both of these, is synthesize the essential whole of the post-modern ferment and crucially takes it beyond disenchantment with the old and offers alternative conceptions of knowledge, fresh discourses on human functioning, new vistas for human science, and exciting directions for approaching change. Constructionism is an approach to human science and practice which replaces the individual with the

*relationship* as the locus of knowledge, and thus is built around a keen appreciation of the power of language and discourse of all types (from words to metaphors to narrative forms, etc.) to create our sense of reality—our sense of the true, the good, the possible.

Philosophically it involves a decisive shift in western intellectual tradition from *cogito ergo sum*, **to** *communicamus ergo sum* and in practice constructionism replaces absolutist claims or the final word with the never ending collaborative quest to understand and construct options for better living. The common thread in all the writing is a concern with the processes by which human beings, their meanings, their commonsense and scientific knowledge are both produced in, and reproduce, human communities. It is not our purpose to repeat or decode the many elements in Gergen's advance toward a "scholarship of transformation" but we do want to touch on one of the main ideas.

In a word it is constructionism's idea of "generative theory. Generative theory vitally eclipses, perhaps in the most convincing way ever, the artificial dualism separating theory from practice and paves the way for elevating the craft of theory construction beyond the margins to the core of human science work. Good theory, Gergen declares, is not just backward looking, trying to standardize and simplify life by stressing conformity to what we find; instead it is a cultural resource for co-creating and shaping the world to our to our most imaginative purposes. The key, especially for future scholars, will be in coming to grips with all the implications, opportunities, and new horizons of the decisive shift from "correspondence theory" of truth to a new standard that aims even higher. Good theory, if it is to really matter, is that which should be judged not by its mirroring capacity but by its overall generative capacity:

*"generative theory is that which has capacity to challenge the guiding assumption of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is "taken for granted" and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions"*  
(Gergen, 1994 p. )

From here this perspective invites new and iconoclastic forms of writing; it explores the liberation that can happen when we let go of things like verification and instead place a premium on those methods that expand generative capacity; it traces how the "scientific construction of reality" happens through linguistic forms (how words like "theory Y" enable worlds); it radically searches ways to expand participatory methods and multiple perspectives; and it invites each of us to give full intellectual voice to our visions what is good, and just, and desirable in social existence. And we believe it fits with the times. Theory is not some objective mapping; it is, and perhaps always has been agential. After mapping in a scholarly way all the means by which science takes part in the "scientific construction of social reality" we come back to this: instinctively, intuitively, and tacitly we all know that important ideas can, in a flash, profoundly alter the way

we talk about ourselves, account for reality, and conduct our lives. Experience shows that a simple economic forecast, a new vocabulary of “attention deficit disorder”, a political poll, or the ideas behind some technical discovery (like the atomic bomb or the World Wide Web) can forever change the course of human history. What does this have to do with a spirit of inquiry? Lets look further

### Appreciating the Miracle--and Mystery-- of Life

We began to wonder: if our aim as social scientists is not to objectively map and reflect the world, then what is the purpose of our work? Is it possible that through our assumptions, our topics, and our choice of questions, we largely create the world we later discover? Do we live—every one of us-- in world's our inquiries create? Do human systems grow, construct themselves, or evolve in the direction of what they most persistently and genuinely ask questions about? If so, what should be the questions? Likewise we began to reflect on client organizations we were working with: Would Roadway Express, one of the largest trucking companies in the country be talking about re-conceptualizing their entire organization based on McGregor's Theory Y if he, and Abe Maslow along side him, had not dared in scholarship and articulated in speculative ways a new vision, an anticipatory theory, of what was possible? Why in a world that is so vitally shaped through mental models, assumptions, idea systems, language, cultural constructions, our discourses—in short, the very “stuff” of theory—is there so little generative theory like McGregor's and Maslow's? More important, what can we do in our own work to rekindle the passion, excitement, inspiration, courage, and spirit required of a scholarship of transformation capable of breaking the barriers of accepted convention?

We know precious little about generative theorizing—the ways in which inquiry pulsates from a creative question and mobilizes into world-shaping breakthrough. We can point to the results of the generative theories of Albert Einstein or Nobel Laureate Barbara Mcklintock on the world stage, or the generative work in our own field associated with names like Mary Parker Follett, Abe Maslow, and Warren Bennis. But in the end with so little support in our own development for embarking on the generative vocation, we tell ourselves “I am not an Einstein, nor was meant to be” But we disagree. Each one of us is born for creative inquiry and inventiveness, even if the generative impact of our knowledge moves consequentially from crib to mother, or from playground to transformed community( Senge, ).

In a workshop we did with executives a few weeks ago we spontaneously did a simple exercise. What we did felt risky is this highly pragmatic business situation. Clearly it would be at odds with the accepted perceptual logic of the culture. But somehow we needed, at that point in the three-day session, a segway into the

topic of good inquiry—what is it? How to bring it alive? Later in the scheduled agenda, the group would be preparing for a major organization analysis.

We put one word on a flip chart: *wonder*. Without any other prep we asked people to simply turn to the person next to them, and share a personal story from any moment in their lives. For example, some recalled a profound sense of wonder they experienced when their child was born; others described a time they experienced the awesome splendor of nature. We asked them to listen deeply for insights. We planned for about ten minutes

The room was in a buzz. We tried to switch gears back to the scheduled agenda after the 10 minutes, and it was impossible. People were deep into the stories. When finally they did come back we asked people, in relation to the stories, to share adjectives and words related to wonder. These are a sampling:

*Awe; surprise; full engagement; inspiration; sudden insight; emotional; hope-filled; terryfing; amazing awareness; humbling; meaning-filled; sense of discovery; sacred; uplifting; new understanding; demanding; feelings of new life; joy; deep relationship; satisfaction; change and wholeness.*

We were surprised by the list. We found ourselves challenged by *their* work and, self-reflective: how often do we, in fact, feel these qualities when starting a new organization development inquiry?

One week after the session one of the managers sent us the first chapter of a book by Edward O. Wilson—recipient of the National Medal of Science and two Pulitzer Prizes. “Think back to the words generated in the exercise we did” he said, and “take a look at this biologist’s description of his feelings about an inquiry he did near the village of Bernhardsdorp”:

I walked into the forest, struck as always by the coolness of the shade beneath tropical vegetation, and continued until I came to a small glade that opened onto the sandy path. I narrowed the world down to the span of a few meters. Again I tried to compose the mental set-- call it the naturalist’s trance, the hunter’s trance-- by which biologists locate more elusive organisms. I imagined that this place and all its treasures were mine alone and might be so forever in memory...

I focused on a few centimeters of ground and vegetation. I willed animals to materialize, and they came erratically into view. Metallic blue mosquitoes floated down from the canopy in search of a bare patch of skin, cockroaches with their variegated wings perched butterfly-like on sun lit leaves, black carpenter ants sheathed in recumbent golden hairs filed in haste through moss on a rotting log. I turned my head slightly and all of them vanished. Together they composed only in an infinitesimal fraction of the life actually present.... The forest was a tangled bank tumbling down



to the grassland's border. Inside it was a living sea through which I moved like a diver groping across a littered floor. But I knew that all around me bits and pieces, the individual organisms and their populations, were working with extreme precision. A few of the species were locked together in forms of symbiosis so intricate that to pull out one would bring others spiraling to extinction. Such is the consequence of the adaptation by coevolution, the reciprocal genetic changes of species that interact with one another through many life cycles....

After the sun's energy is captured by the green plants, it flows through the chains of organism dendrically, like like blood spreading from the arteries into networks of microscopic capillaries, in the life cycles of thousands of individual species, that life's important work is done. Thus nothing in the whole system makes sense until the natural history of the constituent species becomes known...

As the light's intensity rose and fell with the transit of the sun, silverfish, beetles, spiders, and lice, and other creatures were summoned from their sanctuaries and retreated back in alternation... Now to the very heart of wonder. Because species diversity was created prior to humanity, and because we evolved within it, we have never fathomed its limits. As a consequence, the living world is the natural domain of the most restless and paradoxical part of the human spirit. Our sense of wonder grows exponentially: the greater the knowledge, the deeper the mystery and the more we seek knowledge to create new mystery. This catalytic reaction, seemingly an inboard trait, draws us perpetually forward in a search for new places and new life. (p. 8-10)

This excerpt is a enlightening example of the spiritual nature of inquiry, how inquiry can be an exhilarating adventure when the inquirer approaches a topic with a sense of reverence. Having read this, one is tempted to assume that it was the grandeur of the forest that transformed Wilson and inspired awe in him. However, if we look a little closer at this example, we notice how Wilson's very first gestures of inquiry set the stage for a wondrous discovery.

Wilson begins with the assumption that there is something marvelous to be found. He pretends that "this place and all its treasures were mine alone and might be so forever in memory..." He abandons routine ways of knowing and approaches the forest in a "hunter's trance," assuming a reverent posture of openness. And indeed, the world now reveals itself to him differently. In a matter that is consistent with Gergen's notion of the relational co-construction, this forest now appears to him as a place of wonder and mystery, vitally alive. He can now "see" things differently. What to some looks like a common forest floor, for him becomes a "tangled bank," a "living sea." The forest itself becomes transformed into a magical unity of "extreme precision," filled with living,

symbiotic, intricate networks of relations. Finally, he comes away with insights into the inquiry itself, about “the very heart of wonder.”

The world is filled with boundless mystery and when one ponders it with a kind of innocent wonder, open to surprise, one discovers a world brimming with vitality. Indeed, the researcher here experiences a connectedness, an intimate intermingling that expands his very sense of himself. Both the forest and the researcher are changed and revitalized. Finally, he has an insight into the self fulfilling nature of inquiry in which we are participants in creating what we discover: “the greater the knowledge, the deeper the mystery and the more we seek knowledge to create new mystery.” This is inquiry as romance.

Friendly echoes of this passage are found in Warren Bennis’s reflections on the generative impact of Maslow’s work: “I always sensed, when with Abe, a childlike spirit of innocence and wonder—always wearing his eyebrows continually raised in a constant expression of awe”. The two big things Abe gave to all of us, said Bennis, was: “the art and science of becoming more fully human and the democratization of the soul”.

Now let’s go back to the workshop. Intrigued with the list of descriptive words the managers developed (see above, awe; inspired; etc.), we asked the executives to now prepare another inventory. We invited them to think back to the last time they had participated, with or without the assistance of consultants, in some kind of organizational analysis. We asked them to recall their experiences and how they felt about what they did and found. Consider these words and adjectives:

List # 2. disappointed; confirmed big gaps; sense of urgency and threat; painful; overwhelmed; conflicted; sense of resistance; honest and disciplined; self-critical; gave marching orders; fragmented; sense of déjà vu; valid; challenged our complacency; eye opening; a bugle call; doubt about our capacity for change; exhausting; what happened to follow through?; petered out; too slow; contentious; depressing.

How might we make sense of these inventories *juxtaposed*?

The way we conceive of the social world is of consequence to the kind of world we “discover” and even, through our reconstructions, helps to create it. Managers or action-researchers, like scientists in other areas, tend to approach their work from a framework of taken-for-granted assumptions and vocabularies: what it is we are doing, what it is we are looking for, assumptions about why we are doing the inquiry, ways of talking, specialized vocabularies, and so on. In time the conventional view can become so solidly embedded that it assumes the status of being real. As Weick (1995, 35-6) puts it: “Over time, routines develop and the meaning of objects becomes fixed...people seem to need the idea that there is a world with pre-given features or ready-made information...”. Weick continues to speak about the power and grip, for example, of the military metaphor in

organization thought, replete with the languages of command-and-control, wars in the marketplace, and the like.

There is one metaphor that dominates the arena of applied inquiry-- whether talking about medicine, action-research, community assessment, organizational analysis, or management as inquiry. Indeed in many ways it is not even thought about as a metaphor at all but reality. In a phrase, it is that our institutions *are* “problems-to-be-solved”. It is not that our organizations have some problems, but *they are* a problem—therefore inquiry equals problem solving; to do good inquiry means to solve “real problems”. Consider these happenings:

Dilbert is the all time best selling author in the management book literature (see *Dilberts Management Principles*). Our field is filled with the language of the problematic categories that include gap analysis, organization diagnosis, resistance, root cause of failures, variance analysis, inhibiting factors, defensive routines, bureaucratic breakdowns, need for going *beneath* the symptoms, and the like. More telling, perhaps, is that such language is apparently built right into the core of the way we teach, like in Harvard’s famous case study approach. In previous experiments with management students, we have asked groups to read a short 10-15 page case study on General Motors. WE gave one simple instruction: read the case and as a group *do an organizational analysis and prepare a presentation report-out in 45 minutes*. we did not specify what or how to do the analysis. And this is the point. When groups returned, they did not offer diverse approaches to the “neutral” case descriptions. In fact, it was clear that they were enacting a shared grammar or code that they had commonly come to accept as the “natural” way of seeing and analyzing organizational life. Ninety percent of the time here is what a spokesperson for the group comes back with

*Our group debated the reading for some time but came to the conclusion that this is the biggest problem: that among other things, the real “felt need”, the number one problem in this case, is the fact that GM has lost touch with its customers’ wants. There is evidence o numerous pages when you read the case...(then they flip the page on the flipchart). Next we decided we needed to go deeper. What, we asked ourselves, might be the root cause? Again we debated, but eventually narrowed it down to two things—top management, because of the growing hierarchies, has lost touch. Another thing is that GM, in our view, has not invested enough in research and development into the changes in the marketplace (another flip chart change). Then we began brainstorming: if we were in charge what would we do? If we were the general manager, here is the action plan, the interventio; this is what we would do!*

This serves as an example of what we mean when we said earlier that a culture’s repertoire of theoretical terms guide what they discover as real. When we begin our inquiry with the assumption that organizations are problems, we have a whole family of linguistic categories, distinctions, attributions that seem to be

accurate descriptions and blind us to our own complicity in creating what we are finding. So ingrained is this mode of inquiry that this is what happens almost every time we have done it. Of course groups add a perfunctory comment here and there about organization assets or strengths, but mostly as a footnote or addendum to the main point. Embedded in this problem-solving way of talking is also a theory of change. It is a *deficit-based theory of change* that says the best way to enact effective change is to accurately map and understand the deficient, the broken, and the problematic and then create valid information as to the underlying causes. It is the familiar essence of virtually every continuous improvement method and bears direct resemblance to most definitions of action research.

Early in our career we wrote about this in more depth and began an exploration with an appreciative approach to action research. In the spring of 1987 a research series called Research in Organization Development and Change published an article ours titled “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life” (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). That article generated more experimentation, more debate, and more action and intervention in the field than anything else we have written. In the years since the theory and vision for appreciative inquiry was published there have been many hundreds of people involved in co-creating new concepts and practices for doing AI, and for bringing the spirit and methodology of AI into organizations all over the world.<sup>1</sup> It was our contention, that advances in generative theorizing would come about when the discipline expanded its universe of exploration. What would happen to our inquiry, we puzzled, if we let go of the problem-based, and the related categories associated with a deficit view of organizations?

Organizing was not a problem-to-be-solved, we hypothesized. No organization was created as a problem-to-be-solved. Organizations were created as *solutions* not problems. Would a solution metaphor change our inquiry? After short experimentation we realized we were embedded in the same vocabulary of problem solving, locked in a universe of understanding in which the world is defined *a-priori* in deficit-based ways. “Solution”, we realized, still implies a problematic something. We began to notice this problem solving orientation in other settings. We noted, for example, how the word “solutions” soon became the “new” language in the advertising of big consulting firms like Anderson, Cap Gemini, Ernst and Young and others, as if they were selling their ready-made solutions to other’s inevitable set of problems.

Edgar Mitchell, in his book *The Home Planet*, wrote about inquiry in a way that touched us and gave us pause to reflect. He wrote:

“Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light,

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<sup>1</sup> A recent published bibliography lists over 300 articles on appreciative inquiry, many with the term appreciative inquiry in the title (see Fry, Barrett, Whitney 2001).

delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black *mystery*. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth...home”.

This gets us close. It raises the bar. It helps us begin to define it: *Inquiry is the experience of mystery which changes our life*.

Since our earliest work with appreciative inquiry we have come to increasingly understand that we are in the midst of inquiry when in fact we experience a sense of awe; when we are capable of appreciating, even in the smallest way, the miracle of life on this planet.

Generative theory—creating new constructs that have the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster consideration on that which is taken for granted and thereby furnishes fresh images, vocabularies, and options of world benefit—requires generative metaphor. What would happen to our inquiry, we asked, if we shifted the story we tell ourselves about ourselves: organizations are not problems-to-be-solved but rather are centers of human relatedness *alive* with infinite capacity and filled with “more than what is knowable” in terms of creative, relational possibility?

Certainly one could base an inter-human science on this: that the fact of social-organizational existence as such *is* a miracle of life on this planet, every bit the miracle of a sunrise, or a spring morning in the woods. The *miracle and mystery of inter-being*—this could perhaps be a metaphor that would, almost by definition, be an inexhaustible starting point for raising an endless array of questions of human and global significance. It could—with its intertextual sense of reverence for life-- be an invitation to a biocentric vocabulary of understanding, what Bill Moyers recently talked about as “the language of life”, poetic and freeing instead of brittle and abstract. This, in most simple articulation, would become foundation, the “root metaphor”, for a human science approach called appreciative inquiry.

At this point it's fair to raise questions of pragmatics. For those of us breastfed by an industrial giant that stripped the world of its wonder and awe, it might well feel like an irrelevant, absurd, and even distracting interruption to pause, reflect deeply, and then open ourselves with genuine humility to the depth of what we can never know. But this too is the point. Guarding old knowledge is not a good way to understand. New understanding emerges when we begin our inquiry from a different starting point, one in which we welcome the unknown. It means throwing away old certainties, and entering mystery. Such are the pragmatics of inquiry. Perhaps what we are talking about *is* a methodological imperative. This is what Joseph Campbell means when he says “awe is what moves us forward” and that we will be better if we cultivate more of it. And he is not alone.

According to Albert Schweitzer (1969) it is precisely recognition of the ultimate mystery, actively keeping the mystery element in life intact, that ignites, simultaneously, the life of the mind and a “reverence for life”:

In all respects the universe remains mysterious to human beings...as soon as a human being does not take his or her existence for granted, but beholds it as something unfathomably mysterious, thought begins. This phenomenon has been repeated time and time again in the history of the human race. Ethical affirmation of life is the intellectual act by which a human being ceases simply to live at random.... such thought has a dual task to accomplish: to lead us out of a naïve and into a profounder affirmation of life and the universe (p. 33).

This, in a “nutshell”, is precisely why the two words—appreciation and inquiry—belong so intimately together. *To appreciate* means to value that which has value and gives life to living systems when they are most alive, effective, and connected in healthy ways to their communities. To appreciate also means “to increase in value”. We say, for example, that the economy has appreciated in value. Combining the two—appreciation as a way of knowing *and* appreciation as an increase in value— suggests that appreciative inquiry is simultaneously a life-centric form of study and a constructive mode of action where *valuing is creating*, where inquiry and change are powerfully related and understood as a seamless and integral whole. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential—linking people, as it were, to the “positive core” of their past, present, and future capacities including those available in their nested set of relations from the local to the universal. One thing is evident and clear as we reflect on the most important things we have learned with AI: human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated.

Umberto Maturana’s ideas about language and world construction are provocative here, especially his conviction about the role of emotion in human knowing when he says with daring precision: “love is the only thing that advances intelligence”. Nietzsche, too, said something similar but more linked to the idea of change: “valuing is creating” he said, “hear it ye creating ones

The essence of what we are proposing is that our metaphors matter; that we might actively change them much like a sailor changes sails to concentrate the power of the wind; that inquiry *is* the experience of mystery that changes us when we enlarge our sense of the miracle of life on this planet; and that nothing is more practical for realizing our desire to open the world to new possibilities than approaching our work in ways that cultivate our own sense of awe, love, surprise and curiosity. Easy to do? Or are these qualities simply for great

mystics or the birthright of people with exceptional genius, like Abe Maslow, who said “Not only does science begin in wonder, it ends in wonder”.

### Love the Questions Themselves

This brings us to the pragmatic core we have learned about cultivating a spirit of inquiry. Even before saying it we are quite aware that this may sound so obvious that it appears unnecessary to single it out. But this is it: *it is the questions that count*. We are tempted to say, they are everything. “Like the treasure hidden in broad daylight, questions are the heart and soul” of generative work (Goldberg, 1999, p. ). Two quick stories illustrate. Both were award winning projects.

Park Plaza was a flea-bitten, one-star hotel that was taken over and challenged to transform itself. The mandate to the managers of this low-cost, high turnover, poorly managed hotel was frightening: the new parent company wanted a rapid turnaround in service from one-star to a four-star externally determined rating. They invested immediately and put \$15 million into transforming the physical setting with marble floors, exotic furniture, new rooms and the like. But nothing was done on the human side. So a year later nothing really was changed. We were asked to do action research that would engage everyone in the collaborative diagnosis and creation of an action plan that would help the hotel in fact realize 4-star status. In the meantime people were fearful of failure and that they would be fired; there is always the possibility of wholesale house-cleaning in any takeover of this kind.

While the story is very involved (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990) there is one moment that created a powerful learning. We proposed, in the organization assessment phase, that we let go of all diagnostic, problem oriented analysis—literally put a moratorium on all deficit analysis of assessing low morale, turf issues, gaps in communications, mistrust, bureaucratic breakdowns. But the general manager would not go for it, for example, when we said that the deficit based assumptions would make their organization-change come to a slow crawl, that is, if we treated and defined the system a “a problem-to- be-solved”. Suppose what might happen, we suggested, if we engaged everyone in an inquiry with an alternative metaphor. The CEO almost laughed when we suggested “organizations are centers of infinite relational capacity, alive with infinite imagination and open, indeterminate, and ultimately in terms of the future *a mystery*”. One of the presenting “issues”, for example, was horrendous guest responsiveness and a culture of not caring. So we proposed a both/and scenario, in essence an experiment.

One set of employees would be asked to do an organization diagnosis. In the prep workshop they were given classic problem analytic models and created problem-finding questions: *what are the largest barriers to your work? What are the causes of breakdowns in guest responsiveness?* The other group would have

a workshop on appreciative inquiry. They were asked to “try-on” the half-full *assumption*: that the capacity for caring was in fact everywhere in the system and indeed there were moments of revolutionary guest responsiveness all over where people went way beyond job descriptions, going the extra mile, serving with passion. The core question in interviews, created by them, was something like this:

*Revolutionary Guest Caring: The mark of our hotel when we have been really good, beyond even our most common best, has been those times we have responded to and exceeded our guest's expectations. Our assumption is that you too have been part of those times—perhaps at least once or many times. We want to know your story and then your vision of our future.*

A. Can you share with me the story of when you were part of a successful, even revolutionary, moment of guest responsiveness – a time where you and others met and exceeded needs on both sides. Describe the situation in detail. What made it feel radically different? Who was involved? How did you interact differently, what were the outcomes and benefits you experienced?

B. Now with that story told, let's assume that tonight, after work, you fall asleep and do not wake up for ten years. But while asleep a miracle happened and our entire hotel, as an organization, became during that decade, the kind of organization you would most like to see. Many positive changes have happened. So now you wake up, it is 1999, and you come to this place. What do you see happening now that is different, new, better?

When the two workshops were complete it was time to ask the groups to go do their separate interviews, with different people in the hotel. No mention was made, however, about how the two groups differed. The different questions were *not* shared. Each separate would do 30 interviews each and prepare a thematic report of the findings. They would come together, for the first time, to share their organizational assessment in two weeks.

So far so good. That is until the day of the report-outs. It was amazing. The first group that volunteered to share was the appreciative group. Each person was visibly excited and each had a role in the session. Their energy was infectious. For one thing, they discovered that every employee they talked to wanted to participate in building a 4-star vision and that there was one story after another of exceptional moments of guest responsiveness. In addition, the images of the future were compelling and inspired. The group shared wonderful quotes from the people they interviewed. The problem-finders sat motionless. Then they made a tough charge: “*where did you find all this; certainly not here at this hotel*



*with all its breakdowns? We did not hear anything like what you are saying? Why are you fabricating?"*

Now the tables turned. We said "hold on, let's give the other group a chance to report". So the second group presented (one person presented, the others sat back) a listing of about fifty serious problems, for example, negative supervision and inter-departmental frictions, and then, statistics on rock-bottom customer satisfaction. The scenario they heard and painted of the future was dismal. It was loaded with a vocabulary of threat. Some people felt like housecleaning should indeed take place; there were anonymous quotes that said place should be closed down. It was again *deja-vu*: the appreciative group questioned the authenticity of the data: "these are not the things we heard in the interviews". Both groups were now confused.

We then asked everyone to exchange interview guides and to notice the questions. It set the stage for one of the best conversations about social construction of reality we have ever had: language and reality; the impact of analysis on our feelings of motivation and fear; the impact of human inquiry on the development of relationships; the idea of culture and narrative; notions of reflexivity and the "enlightenment" effect of inquiry; and the relationship between inquiry and change.

Our pragmatic question was this: in relation to helping propel good change, which data set do you think would honestly bring us together create the future we want? The story ends dramatically. The Hotel embarked on a four-year process of appreciative inquiry and a doctoral dissertation traced the whole system transformation and showed how discourse precedes changes in structures, systems, policies, and even *awareness* (Barrett, ). A short time later the hotel received the coveted four-star status, without layoffs, and we felt honored when one of the theory pieces written on it received best paper of the year award at the Academy of Management (Barrett and Cooperrider, ).

Two major learnings deserve more research. The first is the proposition that we live in worlds our questions create. The questions we ask structure what we find; what we find becomes the basis for our conversation and dialogue; and this all becomes the ground out of which we imagine, make-sense, narrate, theorize, speculate and construct our future together. Questions do more than gather information. Inquiry intervenes: it focuses attention and directs energy; it provides a container delimiting or expanding what is there to see; it affects rapport and relationships; it sets agendas lifting up what is deemed important; and it ignites conversational universes based on the symbiotic relationship that exists in the two key elements of language, namely, the intrinsic relationship between questions and statements (Goldberg, 1999). Consider the difference. One supervisor begins the weekly meeting with: *Why do we still have these problems? Why do you blow it so often? What resistances do you think we will face?*

Another asks: OK group, let start: *What possibilities exist that we haven't yet thought about? What's the smallest change that could have the biggest benefit? Is there any other way to think about this?*

The omnipresence of questions, and their inherent potential to evoke whole new worlds of possibilities suggests a second insight that is even more central to this paper. What we have found, in our own lives, is that we *too* move—emotionally, theoretically, relationally, spiritually—in the direction of what we ask questions about. Inquiry intervenes and it works both ways; it intervenes “in-here” as well as “out there”. In other words the questions we ask have a double import.

Here was surprising learning. The conventional view says that to do good inquiry you do in fact need to feel some special set of qualities: intellectual curiosity, awe, openness to surprise, humility, the ability to value, the beginners mind—in short, everything we have associated with spirit of inquiry. But now an honest admission. We wish we felt these things with every new organization analysis. But we do not; in fact at the beginning we rarely do so. It is not often that after receiving a call to help with some organizational problem or crises that we begin a new action research project feeling a profound state of wonder, what William James so aptly called the state of “ontological wonder”. So how do we cultivate it?

What we increasingly realize that it is, again, all in the questions—the appreciative, life-centric ones, what we have called *the unconditional positive question* (Cooperrider, 1996). The doorway into wonder may not be as difficult as it seems. Pragmatically, at least for us, it is not so much a process of trying romantically to recover the state of being a child; nor is it the same path as taken by the mystic in spiritual retreat. Indeed it can begin quite easily in ordinary circumstances of discovery, conversation, and the deepening of relationship all endowed by the positive question. Here is the crux of the matter. *Inquiry itself creates wonder. It is not the other way around. When we are really in a mode of inquiry, doorways into appreciable worlds are opened up everywhere. Entering into those worlds—those locked up conversations-- would not have happened without the question. The feeling of wonder is the outcome. We know that we are doing inquiry when, at the end of the day, we feel more spirit.*

### What Good Are Positive Emotions?

Early in the 1990s on his first trip to Jerusalem His Holiness the Dalai Lama proposed, “If the leadership of the world’s religions could simply get to know one another ...the world could be a different, a better place.” So several meetings were scheduled in various places, from Washington DC to Jerusalem; the most recent was at the Carter Center (see Cooperrider, ). The purpose: to create a secure, private, small and relatively unstructured forum where leaders can have conversation with one another, know one another in mutually respectful

ways, and reflect on the hard issues of the world without binding any institution to another. Appreciative inquiry was selected as the action-research model, for data gathering, bringing people together, and creating together.

In preparation for the meeting in Atlanta we had a chance to begin our inquiry with President Jimmy Carter—he too, along with the religious leaders, would be part of the deliberations. I asked him to reflect on moments of **transformational cooperation**. It is an example not of a typical diagnostic or even “neutral” question but of a life-centric unconditional positive question. It starts with a positive pre-supposition:

*All of us as leaders of change have joined with others to bring visions of a better world into existence. I would like you to think about it too: obviously there have been ups and downs and twists and turns, high points and low points, in your career of helping people collaborate across boundaries. Can you think of a high point in recent years—a time that stands out for you as a change-agent when you felt most alive, engaged, effective; a time when you successfully helped bring people together in a moment of transformational cooperation?*

It was a great interview and here is just an excerpt to one story he shared:

*I know precisely the moment. It is when we have put the last nail in the structure for a new Habitat for Humanity home...the whole group stands together in front of the home in a circle, and we say a prayer, celebrate, and talk. People are together as equals, black and white, across all racial boundaries and all class boundaries—and you see right in front of you the tangible image of our joint capacity to deal with poverty. At those moments, you feel miracles of benefit to people are possible...and the tears will well up in my eyes.*

Today Habitat for Humanity is building more homes than any other nonprofit or for-profit corporate homebuilder, and we are engaged in a major research project studying and building theory, from hundreds of stories just like this, stories that hopefully will help enlarge our vision of the world’s cooperative potential. And with each story and precious new relationship (Cooperrider and Dutton, 1999) we have found our own sense of inspiration, hope and joy expanding. In other words we can cultivate, actively, our own spirit of inquiry simply by doing more of it. More importantly, the benefits are larger than one might think. We want to connect this tentative insight and conclude this article with something the Dalai Lama said at our meeting, but first a speculation on one final question: *what good are positive emotions, specifically our emotions as scholars and change agents?*

This is a question that truly deserves the attention of doctoral level research, in part because it is at odds with so much in our deficit-focused cultures in

academia, bureaucracy, and even cynical media or society at large. We are ambivalent, says Vereena Kast (1991) in a book called *Joy, Inspiration, and Hope*: we both seek after these emotions and hold them with suspect. But in her groundbreaking research at University of Michigan Barbara Fredrickson's "broaden-and-build" model of the positive emotions says we should all think again. It's powerful research. It has received many accolades; and past President of the APA Marty Seligman has recently hailed it for its courage, empirical rigor, its sweeping synthesis with others, and its challenge for all of psychology which, to date, has been pre-occupied in its studies of negative states, like depression, anxiety and the like. What she has shown, perhaps for the first time, is precisely how the positive emotions—those of joy, interest, and contentment-- have an *undoing* effect on negative ones and how they broaden and build our "thought-action repertoires", creative intelligence, cognitive complexity, ability to trust new experiences, cultivate relationships and health, and even create changes in the brain structures physically (Fredrickson, 1998). "The possible benefits of positive emotions seem particularly undervalued in cultures like ours" she writes, "the capacity to experience and cultivate the positive emotions remains a largely untapped human strength" (Fredrickson, 2000). To be sure it is not likely one would find much of these things in a research methods course or even a how-to book on action research. But this *is* the "stuff" of inquiry; perhaps the very heart of it

### Conclusion

Simply put what we have tried to do in this reflection is to re-affirm the Lewinian call that there is nothing as practical as *generative theory*; that a scholarship of transformation needs root metaphors that move us beyond the pervasive mental models of "organizations as problems to be solved"; that appreciative inquiry, with its life-centric focus and conviction that inquiry *is* the experience of mystery, represents a viable compliment to conventional modalities; and finally, that cultivating a spirit of inquiry in our work means cultivating the positive emotions of hope, of inspiration, and joy. Is it easy? Our answer is yes. It cannot be helped—that is when we are truly in a mode of inquiry. Perhaps this is our vocation. We are born to appreciate. Einstein, for one, did it. He connected the idea of genius with the kind of everyday spirituality that ignites the life of the mind when he said: "There are only two ways to live...One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."